



## KOREAN SCREEN CULTURE GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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## KOREAN SCREEN CULTURE: GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

By BARBARA WALL

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In his introduction to a special issue based on articles originating from the Korean Screen Culture Conference in *Acta Koreana* in December 2013 Andrew Jackson expressed his wish that the Korean Screen Culture Conference became an annual event. His wish came true. Four years later this special issue of *Acta Koreana* grew directly out of the Sixth Korean Screen Culture Conference, which was held at the University of Hamburg on June 16–17, 2017. The 2017 conference attracted thirty-five presenters from thirteen countries, including New Zealand, Russia, Denmark, the UK, India, the Netherlands, Canada, the Philippines, Singapore, Germany, Sweden, the USA and Korea, despite the fact that travel grants were extremely limited. These numbers represent significant growth since the conference was founded in 2012 by Andrew Jackson. In just six years, the location of the conference has moved from London to Sheffield and then to Copenhagen and Hamburg, and the conference has become more interdisciplinary and attracted scholars from more countries. The first conference in 2012 had only five participants who discussed Korean cinema, but just a year later the 2013 conference attracted twenty-five participants from seven different countries.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the focus of the conference has expanded to include television, web comics, and music videos.

What makes the conference so attractive? Part of the success of this annual conference is of course related to the phenomenon of *hallyu*, or the Korean Wave. The 2017 conference venue in Hamburg was filled to bursting with students—

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\* The 6<sup>th</sup> Korean Screen Culture Conference was carried out with the financial support of the Korea Foundation, the University of Hamburg, and the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Hamburg.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Jackson's introduction to a special issue on the Korean Screen Culture Conference in *Acta Koreana* Vol 16, No. 2 (2013): 277–280.

both local and not—who were enthusiastic about having the chance to listen to experts on K-pop, K-drama, webtoons, and Korean films. But while the ongoing popularity of *hallyu* is certainly one of the main reasons for the success of the event, it is not the only one. The Korean Screen Culture Conference combines the nonhierarchical, refreshing charm of a graduate student conference with the inspiring atmosphere of an expert workshop, while attracting scholars from many different backgrounds, including of course cinema studies and Korean studies, as well as anthropology, comparative literature, popular culture, folklore, linguistics, performing arts, sociology, and Japanese and Chinese studies. This diversity of academic age and disciplinary expertise sparks discussions that are not typical at other established conferences.

The Sixth Korean Screen Culture Conference had ten panels and ended with a keynote speech by Hye Seung Chung on migrant workers in contemporary South Korean mockumentaries. The first panel of the conference was devoted to the film *Train to Busan* (*Pusan-haeng*, Yeon Sang-ho 2016), followed by panels that were arranged according to the following themes: “Masculinity and Femininity in K-Drama and Webtoons”, “Colonial Korea in Films”, “Hallyu in the World”, “History on Screen”, “Korean Culture Industries”, “Questions of Belonging 1&2”, “Gangster Films, Queer Films, and Art-House Films”. One panel was exclusively devoted to Music Videos.

The three papers that were selected for this special issue are representative of the range of work represented at the Korean Screen Culture Conference. In the first paper Namhee Han analyzes the role of “cinematic theatricality” in Han Hyŏn-mo’s film *Madame Freedom* (*Chayu puin*, 1956), using the tools of Cinema Studies. In the second paper, Bonnie Tilland employs a sociocultural anthropology perspective to examine the function of K-pop and K-drama. Tilland’s analysis shows how future-oriented K-pop and nostalgia-inducing K-dramas (television series) serve as means for mothers and daughters to understand each other’s emotional worlds. The third and last paper leads us into the realm of “screen Christianity,” as sociocultural anthropologist Heather Melquist Lehto analyzes the role of video and projection screens in transnational multisite churches based in South Korea. While these three papers shed light on different issues and use different approaches, they are all connected by the medium of the screen.

In the first paper Namhee Han examines Han Hyŏng-mo’s *Madame Freedom*, which is a filmic adaptation of Chŏng Pi-sŏk’s novel of the same title. Rather than focusing on the novel, Namhee Han draws her readers’ attention to the cinematic achievements of the film. Both film and novel tell a story of the transformation of a traditional housewife—the so-called “Madame Freedom”—as she discovers her sexual and economic desires and starts to frequent a dance hall. Han argues

that it is “cinematic theatricality” that distinguishes the film from the original literary work. “Theatricality” here can be understood in contrast to “absorption”; while theatricality reminds the spectator of her position as spectator, absorption intends to make the spectator oblivious to it. In *Madame Freedom* cinematic theatricality creates a unique display-spectator relationship, making the spectator aware of her own act of looking and allowing her to see the film from different perspectives.

Han’s analysis includes an insightful overview of South Korean dance culture of the 1950s, after which she concludes that “the female dancing body signified the embodiment of South Korea’s social anxiety toward the overwhelming presence of cultural America and the consumerist decadence that would undermine the South’s psychological warfare against the North.” The cinematic theatricality in *Madame Freedom*, however, allows the spectator to experience both *jouissance* and anxiety, because it reveals the intense power not only in the gaze imposed upon a woman like “Madame Freedom”, but also that in her own gaze. In contrast, classical Hollywood cinema usually emphasizes only the gaze imposed upon the woman, and limits the woman’s position to a passive one. By preventing the spectator from becoming absorbed in the movie, cinematic theatricality creates distance and gives the spectator the chance to look at the people and events represented on screen without identifying with them, and while still being able to enjoy what she sees. Han identifies cinematic theatricality as the means by which *Madame Freedom* made spectators aware of the emergence of the gendered and ethnocultural gaze and the Cold War visual mechanism that attempted to place the individual body and desire under surveillance.

In the second paper “Save Your K-Drama for Your Mama: Mother-Daughter Bonding in Between Nostalgia and Futurism”, Bonnie Tilland explores the discourse around the nostalgia-laden television dramas in the *Answer Me* franchise and its effect on the relationships between mothers and daughters. Tilland suggests that K-pop is relentlessly future-oriented, always pushing its idols into their next big hit, while she characterizes Korean television dramas, which often resonate with events in the spectators’ own lives, as a nostalgic product with a potentially “therapeutic quality”. However, despite their oppositional orientation, Tilland argues that K-pop and K-drama are not totally isolated from each other. Significant overlaps occur, for example, when the music used for the soundtrack of a television drama is sung by an idol group or solo idol singer, or when K-dramas focus on pop idols.

Drawing on interviews with mothers and their daughters about pop music consumption and fandom, Tilland demonstrates how television dramas like *God of Study* (2010), *Dream High* (2010), and especially *Answer Me 1997* (2012), each of

which either featured a subplot about an aspiring K-pop idol or somehow focused on K-pop idols, attracted both mothers and daughters and strengthened the bond between them. As they watched the dramas together, mothers gained an insight into the world their daughters were living in, while daughters became familiar with their mothers' preferred medium, television dramas. Tilland also points to the fact that drama viewers not only watch drama, but also "live" in them and reflect on the world through them in the same way as K-pop fans not only listen to the songs and watch the music videos, but also "live" in them and relate them to their lives. Thus, by combining K-drama and K-pop, *Answer Me 1997* as well as its later iterations *Answer Me 1994* and *1988* create a convergence of dramascapes and soundscapes that inspire viewers to reflect on their personal lives and bridge the generation gap.

Leaving the relatively familiar fields of film and television, Heather Melquist Lehto carries us over to the field of "screen Christianity." Her article is based on field research in transnational multisite churches which are based in South Korea. The churches she studied have branches in Seoul and Los Angeles. Melquist Lehto defines "screen Christianity" as a type of Christian worship ritual in which screens and their attendant practices play an essential role. While other analyses of video sermons and televangelism often neglect the role of the screens in favor of religious content, this paper foregrounds the role of the screen by arguing that the screens themselves take on theological significance. As "holy infrastructure," they facilitate contact with celebrity pastors, which often results in powerful religious experiences. Melquist Lehto first explains how church leaders understand their use of video sermons. She then discusses how screens came to occupy central locations within church spaces and religious practices. In the final section she explores the role of screens in creating communities through congregants' sensory experiences. The article demonstrates that, as one-way media, screens lend themselves to supporting the predominant hierarchy of multisite churches and to reinforcing the head pastor's centrality to the church.

While some have argued that broadcasting or projecting sermons on screens was dangerous or inappropriate to religious practice, in Melquist Lehto's research, Korean church designers argue that screen media in church can make congregants feel more comfortable because it is congruent with their everyday experience outside the church. Congregants agree with this position and praise the "modern" qualities of audiovisual technologies. The fact that screens often occupy a central space within religious spaces suggests that vision, instead of sound or touch, is the sense that is privileged in sanctuary design and liturgical practice. Theological traditions in which hands and the sense of touch play a central role for spiritual transmission and healing are recontextualized in multisite churches. Here,

charismatic pastors are perceived as “touching hearts” through the medium of the screen and, in some cases, the division between the Christian leaders’ hands, the screens, and the hands of God is elided.

While establishing itself as an annual event, the Korean Screen Culture Conference has become a popular platform for the exchange of ideas among scholars from different fields who are all connected through their interest in the medium of the screen. This special issue is very important as it makes the research presented at the conference more visible and permanently accessible for current and future scholars. I hope that it offers a taste of the conference and whets readers’ appetite for more. As this special issue goes to press, Andrew Logie is already busy organizing the Seventh Korean Screen Culture Conference, which will be held at the University of Helsinki in 2018.

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